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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000942

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TAGS: PGOV EAID KDEM JO

SUBJECT: CORRECTED VERSION: ASSOCIATIONS LAW AMENDMENTS
SENT TO JORDAN'S PARLIAMENT

REF: A. AMMAN 450
1B. 08 AMMAN 2300

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Natalie E. Brown
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Note: Classification line changed to reflect correct
classifier. End Note.

11. (C) Summary: Amendments to a 2008 law that increased regulatory burdens and government oversight over civil society were endorsed by Jordan's cabinet on March 24 and will now be considered by parliament (Ref A). Divisions about the draft amendments have already arisen among the civil society coalition which helped to formulate them, with some NGO leaders calling for further concessions from the government. Minister of Social Development Hala Lattouf is attempting to manage the expectations of vocal civil society leaders while convincing skeptical MPs that the amendments are in Jordan's best interest. End Summary.

Cabinet Endorses Amendments

12. (SBU) Following months of internal negotiation, Jordan's cabinet endorsed draft amendments to the controversial Law on Associations on March 24 with no changes from a draft previously circulated in February (outlined in Ref A). The amendments, written in consultation with a coalition of sixteen civil society organizations, were designed to blunt the impact of a 2008 law which drew international criticism for dramatically increasing the regulatory burdens and government oversight over civil society. The cabinet's endorsement makes it almost certain that the amendments will appear during an expected summer extraordinary session of Jordan's parliament, after which they would be sent to the King for endorsement and publication in the Official Gazette.

Rejectionists Complain, Government Prepares

13. (C) While most of our civil society contacts see the amendments as the best deal they are likely to get in the near term, a smaller circle of activists may be putting the amendments in jeopardy by pushing publicly for concessions beyond those painstakingly negotiated over several months with the government. The sixteen civil society organizations that negotiated changes to the law are already planning to suggest further amendments in the future, but a minority in the group are insisting that the changes be enacted in this round rather than in a future negotiation.

14. (C) Rather than pushing their case behind the scenes, the all-or-nothing group is taking its cause to the media. The head of the Jordanian Women's Union, an umbrella organization for NGOs dealing with women's issues, told the English language Jordan Times on April 4 that "the amendments are positive, but they do not meet our expectations or demands." Other members of the vocal minority told poloff that the amendments were "artificial changes," and that they were

"prepared to make a big issue" out of them once they appeared in parliament. Blustery comments aside, even the rejectionists reluctantly acknowledge that the amendments are better than the 2008 law. Yet in public forums, they are still pushing for a law that meets "international standards," regardless of parliament's willingness to pass it.

¶15. (C) Minister Lattouf, who has privately expressed her doubts to us about the amendments' passage, also warned civil society activists that pushing for further concessions will likely produce a backlash that could lead to their defeat or alteration (Ref A). Lattouf met with members of parliament's labor and social affairs committee the week of April 12 to explain the reasoning behind the amendments and convince security-minded conservatives of their value. As part of a media strategy formulated under a USAID-funded program, Lattouf is also meeting with newspaper editors and columnists to lay the groundwork for the amendments' public release ahead of the parliamentary session.

The View from Parliament

¶16. (C) Parliamentary contacts are not yet focused on the details of the amendments but unanimously have expressed their opposition to loosening state control over civil society groups, particularly those perceived to be engaged in political activity. Most see the 2008 law as a positive development that increases the power of the state to oversee Islamist groups and prevent infiltration of charities by radical elements (Ref B). They insist that government control over civil society groups is necessary to maintain

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Jordan's stability, and argue that civil society groups could be used by outside (read: Palestinian/Islamist) forces to undermine the foundation of Hashemite rule.

Comment

¶17. (C) Looking ahead to parliamentary consideration of the amendments, strong government support and minimal public commentary from civil society will be crucial to their passage. In 2008, shrill criticism of the law by civil society leaders (including some of those who are now calling for further concessions) created a wave of ill will in parliament, which many MPs still remember. Weak explanations of the law and lack of clear instructions from the government led to changes in the draft law while under debate in parliament, which placed further regulatory burdens on civil society. As the amendments go forward, there is a real risk that history will repeat itself -- civil society is once again divided on what it will accept, and the government has only recently begun its campaign to bring highly skeptical MPs on board.

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Brown